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ABSTRACT

Jack Mezirow's theory of transformative learning has evolved into a description of how learners learn by integrating new knowledge with their existing knowledge, beliefs, and experiences. Centrality of experience, critical reflection, and rational discourse are three common themes in Mezirow's theory, which is based on psychoanalytic theory and critical social theory. Numerous critical responses to Mezirow's theory of transformative learning have emerged over the years. Robert Boyd, for example, has developed a theory of transformative education based on analytical psychology. Whereas Mezirow's view of transformative learning emphasizes critical reflection and rational discourse, Boyd's emphasizes intuition and emotion. It has been suggested that no single mode of transformative learning exists and that differences in learning contexts, learners, and teachers all affect the experiences of transformative learning. Whether transformative learning is approached as a consciously rational process or through a more intuitive, imaginative process, practitioners seeking to foster a learning environment conducive to transformative learning must consider the following factors: role of the teacher, role of the learner, and role of the rational and affective. Although transformative learning may not always be a goal of adult education, all adult educators should at least strive to understand it. (Contains 11 references) (MN)

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by Susan Imel

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Transformative Learning in Adulthood

A defining condition of being human is that we have to understand the meaning of our experience. For some, any uncritically assimilated explanation by an authority figure will suffice. But in contemporary societies we must learn to make our own interpretations rather than act on the purposes, beliefs, judgments, and feelings of others. Facilitating such understandings is the cardinal goal of adult education. Transformative learning develops autonomous thinking. (Mezirow 1997, p. 5)

Since first introduced by Jack Mezirow in 1978, the concept of transformative learning has been a topic of research and theory building in the field of adult education (Taylor 1998). Although Mezirow is considered to be the major developer of transformative learning theory, other perspectives about transformative learning—influenced by the work of Robert Boyd—are emerging. Following a discussion of transformative learning as conceptualized by Mezirow, this **Digest** describes research and theory building by Robert Boyd and its influence on current perspectives of transformative learning. Some suggestions for fostering transformative learning conclude the **Digest**.

Mezirow and Transformative Learning

The theory of transformative learning that has been developed by Mezirow during the past 2 decades has evolved "into a comprehensive and complex description of how learners construe, validate, and reformulate the meaning of their experience" (Cranton 1994, p. 22). Centrality of experience, critical reflection, and rational discourse are three common themes in Mezirow's theory (Taylor 1998), which is based on psychoanalytic theory (Boyd and Myers 1988) and critical social theory (Scott 1997).

For learners to change their "meaning schemes (specific beliefs, attitudes, and emotional reactions)," they must engage in critical reflection on their experiences, which in turn leads to a perspective transformation (Mezirow 1991, p. 167). "Perspective transformation is the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrating perspective; and, finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings" (ibid.).

Perspective transformation explains how the meaning structures that adults have acquired over a lifetime become transformed. These meaning structures are frames of reference that are based on the totality of individuals' cultural and contextual experiences and that influence how they behave and interpret events (Taylor 1998). An individual's meaning structure will influence how she chooses to vote or how she reacts to women who suffer physical abuse, for example.

The meaning schemes that make up meaning structures may change as an individual adds to or integrates ideas within an existing scheme and, in fact, this transformation of meaning schemes occurs routinely through learning. Perspective transformation leading to transformative learning, however, occurs much less frequently. Mezirow believes that it usually results from a "disorienting dilemma," which is triggered by a life crisis or major life transition, although it may also result from an accumulation of transformations in meaning schemes over a period of time (Mezirow 1995, p. 50).

Meaning schemes are based upon experiences that can be deconstructed and acted upon in a rational way (Taylor 1998). Mezirow (1995) suggests this happens through a series of phases that begin with the disorienting dilemma. Other phases include self-examination, critical assessment of assumptions, recognition that others have shared similar transformations, exploration of new roles or actions, development of a plan for action, acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing the plan, tryout of the plan, development of competence and self-confidence in new roles, and reintegration into life on the basis of new perspectives (ibid., adapted from p. 50).

As described by Mezirow (1997), transformative learning occurs when individuals change their frames of reference by critically reflecting on their assumptions and beliefs and consciously making and implementing plans that bring about new ways of defining their worlds. His theory describes a learning process that is primarily "rational, analytical, and cognitive" with an "inherent logic" (Grabov 1997, pp. 90-91).

Another Perspective

A number of critical responses to Mezirow's theory of transformative learning have emerged over the years. (See Cranton [1994] and Taylor [1998] for a full discussion of these critiques.) One major area of contention surrounding Mezirow's theory is its emphasis upon rationality (ibid.). Although many empirical studies support Mezirow's contention that critical reflection is central to transformative learning, others have "concluded that critical reflection is granted too much importance in a perspective transformation, a process too rationally driven" (Taylor 1998, pp. 33-34). A view of transformative learning as an "intuitive, creative, emotional process" is beginning to emerge in the literature (Grabov 1997, p. 90). This view of transformative learning is based primarily on the work of Robert Boyd (Boyd and Myers 1988), who has developed a theory of transformative education based on analytical (or depth) psychology.

For Boyd, transformation is a "fundamental change in one's personality involving [together] the resolution of a personal dilemma and the expansion of consciousness resulting in greater personality integration" (Boyd 1989, p. 459, cited in Taylor 1998, p. 13). The process of discernment is central to transformative education (Boyd and Myers 1988). Discernment calls upon such extrarational sources as symbols, images, and archetypes to assist in creating a personal vision or meaning of what it means to be human (ibid.; Cranton 1994).

The process of discernment is composed of the three activities of receptivity, recognition, and grieving. First, an individual must be *receptive* or open to receiving "alternative expressions of meaning," and then recognize that the message is authentic (Boyd and Myers 1988, p. 277). Grieving, considered by Boyd (ibid.) to be the most critical phase of the discernment process, takes place when an individual realizes that old patterns or ways of perceiving are no longer relevant, moves to adopt or establish new ways, and finally, integrates old and new patterns.

Transformative education draws on the "realm of interior experience, one constituent being the rational expressed through insights, judgments, and decision; the other being the extrarational expressed

through symbols, images, and feelings" (ibid., p. 275). The process of discernment allows the exploration of both, moving back and forth between the rational and the extrarational. Unlike Mezirow, who sees the ego as playing a central role in the process of perspective transformation, Boyd and Myers use a framework that moves beyond the ego and the emphasis on reason and logic to a definition of transformative learning that is more psychosocial in nature (Taylor 1998).

Transformative Learning in Practice

On the surface, the two views of transformative learning presented here are contradictory. One advocates a rational approach that depends primarily on critical reflection whereas the other relies more on intuition and emotion. The differences in the two views, however, may best be seen as a matter of emphasis. Both use rational processes and incorporate imagination as a part of a creative process. Mezirow's view emphasizes the rational whereas Boyd and Myers' relies most heavily on imagination or the extrarational. Grabov (1997) suggests that the two views share a number of commonalities including "humanism, emancipation, autonomy, critical reflection, equity, self-knowledge, participation, communication and discourse" (p. 90).

The two different views of transformative learning described here as well as examples of how it occurs in practice (see, for example, Cranton 1997 and Taylor 1998) suggest that no single mode of transformative learning exists. Differences in learning contexts, learners, and teachers all affect the experiences of transformative learning. Because people learn in different but interwoven ways, educators should not see transformative learning as the only goal of education (Cranton 1994). Based on findings from empirical studies, Taylor (1998) suggests that not all learners are predisposed to engage in transformative learning. The same can be said for teachers. Not all teachers of adults may feel comfortable with a goal of transformative learning. In addition, many adult learning situations do not necessarily lend themselves to transformative learning.

When transformative learning is the goal of adult education, however, how can it best be fostered given the variables of learning contexts, learners, and teachers? Whether transformative learning is approached as a consciously rational process or through a more intuitive, imaginative process, fostering a learning environment in which it can occur should consider the following:

- **The role of the teacher.** The teacher's role in establishing an environment that builds trust and care and facilitates the development of sensitive relationships among learners is a fundamental principle of fostering transformative learning (Taylor 1998). Loughlin (1993) talks about the responsibility of the teacher to create a "community of knowers," individuals who are "united in a shared experience of trying to make meaning of their life experience" (pp. 320-321). As a member of that community, the teacher also sets the stage for transformative learning by serving as a role model and demonstrating a willingness to learn and change by expanding and deepening understanding of and perspectives about both subject matter and teaching (Cranton 1994).

- **The role of the learner.** Taylor (1998) believes that too much emphasis has been placed on the role of the teacher at the expense of the role of the participant. Although it is difficult for transformative learning to occur without the teacher playing a key role, participants also have a responsibility for creating the learning environment. As a part of a community of knowers, learners share the responsibility for constructing and creating the conditions under which transformative learning can occur.

- **The role of the rational and the affective.** Transformative learning has two layers that at times seem to be in conflict: the cognitive, rational, and objective and the intuitive, imaginative, and subjective (Grabov 1997). Both the rational and the affective play a role in transformative learning. Although the emphasis has been on transformative learning as a rational process, teachers need to consider how they can help students connect the rational and the affective by using feelings and emotions both in critical reflection and as a means of reflection (Taylor 1998).

Transformative learning may not always be a goal of adult education, but its importance should not be overlooked and all adult educators should strive to understand it, even if they do not choose to foster it.

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